

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Child Abuse - Shaken Baby Syndrome



Shaken baby syndrome is a form of child abuse that happens when a caregiver violently shakes a baby or small child, causing a whiplash or acceleration/deceleration injuries. At this point the caregiver becomes an abuser and a felon. Although there is usually the lack, of external evidence or trauma or injury, between 1200 and 1600 children a year are injured in the United States. When a shaken child is also slammed against a hard surface the injury is sometimes called shaken impact syndrome.

SBS is a major cause of infant mortality in infants and if the shaken child survives he or she could suffer lifelong neurological damage and disability. About one out of four or one out of five shaken children die from their injuries; many others suffer blindness, motor impairment (like cerebral palsy) or cognitive impairments. Astonishingly, about half of all child abuse related deaths are caused by SBS, and most victims are under one year of age.

Typically, physicians see certain characteristic injuries with SBS, namely: retinal hemorrhages (best seen by an experienced ophthalmologist); multiple fractures of the long bones, and bleeding in the brain (subdural hematomas). Other injuries include fractures of the vertebrae and ribs, oxygen deprivation, swelling of the brain, and other general brain injuries.

SBS victims are often irritable, fail to thrive, are lethargic, change their eating patterns, are prone to vomiting, show head swelling, change their breathing patterns, or may have dilated pupils. The combination of symptoms for SBS is very specific and is not caused by other disorders.

Because their brains are still underdeveloped and under protected, children under three years of age are the most susceptible to injury. Remember, one third of all victims of SBS are killed and another third are severely disabled. The most significant problems are learning disabilities, hydrocephalus, behavior problems, cerebral palsy, and blindness or other visual disorders.

The best way to prevent shaken baby syndrome or child abuse in general is education, especially of new parents, babysitters and other caregivers. Often it is the frustrated caregiver that cannot cope with his or her own frustrations, often over a crying infant. Babies sometimes cry for many normal reasons and caregivers must be trained and capable of dealing with the children in gentle and intelligent ways. Training sessions for caregivers are given regularly; for further information contact Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky (www.pcaky.org) or the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome (www.dontshake.com).

TIP OF THE WEEK: Shaken Baby Child Abuse Training is available in many states. Sessions are free for your organization or group. Contact the above websites for further information. I am also a certified presenter and will provide this service for any group within my area. The session is free of charge and is done under the auspices and approval of Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky. This session is open to the public. I particularly urge caregivers, babysitters, and daycare workers to attend this important event. I am a trained and certified presenter for PCAKY and make this presentation free of charge, or send another trained presenter. There are many other trained presenters through the USA. The session should take about 45 minutes. Afterwards there will be an opportunity to talk about any specific questions or situations that you may have encountered. If we can save one child from brain injury or death then we will have done well.